

SCHIP bill good for Montana

By Rep. Denny Rehberg - 09/30/07 – Helena Independent Record

The latest news from Washington, D.C., is good news for Montana's children.

This past week, my colleagues in the House and I were able to pass a new bill extending the State Children's Health Insurance Program (SCHIP). Since the program was started in 1997, it has done wonders for kids who don't qualify for Medicaid but can't afford private health insurance.

It's great to see that we were able to negotiate on a common sense bill that puts Montana's children first.

Earlier this year, I'd been critical of a previous House version of the bill that would have done more to hurt our kids than to help them.

However, I also stated at the time if a reasonable compromise that resembled the Senate bill was found, I was more than willing to support this important program. Turns out, many members agreed with me. House and Senate members were able to work together and produce a bill that removed many of the provisions that previously made it unacceptable.

There were three main problems with the original House version of the bill. Fortunately, we fixed these problems in the compromise bill.

First, we corrected a loophole that would have allowed illegal aliens to enroll in SCHIP. These individuals broke the law to get into our country, so we certainly shouldn't be paying for their health care. We made it clear, if you can't show us you're here legally, you don't get the same benefits as everyone else.

Second, the bill passed this week maintained the eligible age of the program at 18 years old. The original House version of the bill would have increased this age to 21. The Children's Health Insurance Program was designed for children, and attempts to expand it divert critical resources from needy children.

Finally, we removed provisions in the original House bill that would have made cuts to the Medicare Advantage program, which provides health insurance to 15,931 seniors in Montana. This provision would have pitted seniors against children in a battle for quality health care.

These are just a few of the improvements we were able to make in this compromise legislation. Most important, we were able to pass a good bill that extends a program that has produced great results by providing health insurance to those who can't afford it themselves, kids.

But, it's important we don't stop now. So far, the president has continued his threats to veto the SCHIP bill. Well, Mr. President, I respectfully disagree. This program is just too important.

Additionally, we need to continue our work on the state level. In Montana, it's estimated that there are 19,000 kids who are already eligible for SCHIP or Medicaid but aren't enrolled.

This is a big problem. Federal and state governments need to work together to ensure that families in Montana, and their kids, know about SCHIP; understand that they're eligible; and have the necessary assistance and information to get enrolled. The money and work going toward this program means very little if no one is using it.

The Senate moved quickly in upholding its end of the deal, and now this legislation is heading to the president's desk. As I said before, I urge the president to rethink his decision to veto the bill.

However, as always, I remain ready, willing, and able to work with the president, and my House and Senate colleagues, to get this done for Montana's kids.